



# INDEPENDENT SCHOLARS ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA Inc NSW Chapter Bulletin 122 January 2026

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Dear Members,

Last year ended with vigour with the **Power of Fiction Workshop** on Saturday 22 November the talks from which are featured in this issue of the *Bulletin* and then the **Christmas Lunch** on 4 December, both held at the Castlereagh Boutique Hotel. We had the biggest turn out for the Christmas lunch that we have had since the Christmas events we used to hold prior to COVID and the spirit was very cheerful with members who had not seen each other for some time getting together. See photos below.



L to R: Bob Davidson, Shirley Randell, Hilary Yerbury, Ian Willis, Catherine Rogers, Christine Jennett, Christine Yeats, Michelle Cavanagh



L to R: Christine Kibble, Sue Steggall, Rodney Nilsen, Lesley Potter, Judith Bonzol, Monica Dennison, Sybil Jack, Aedeon Cremin

Welcome to Dr Gaye Wilson (of Cattai) who has recently joined ISAA. Gaye is an Editor, Researcher, Historian and Egyptologist.

The Public Affairs Reading Group will meet via Zoom on 3 pm Wednesday 25 March to discuss Tim Berners-Lee's *This is for Everyone: The Unfinished Story of the World Wide Web*, 2025. If you would like to join the discussion please email the convenor Christine Jennett [cjennett@ozemail.com.au](mailto:cjennett@ozemail.com.au).

The Biography Reading Group's first meeting will be on 26 February 2-3.30 pm discussing 'The Rebel's Clinic: The Revolutionary Lives of Frantz Fanon' by Adam Shatz, 2024. If you are interested in joining us please contact the convenor Alice Paul on [acpns6@gmail.com](mailto:acpns6@gmail.com).

If you have any contributions for the next *Bulletin*, such as scholarly book notes, notes on exhibitions, films or plays, or interesting snippets of research, please send them to me by **9 April 2026** at: [cjennett@ozemail.com.au](mailto:cjennett@ozemail.com.au).

**Christine Jennett, *Bulletin* Editor**

## NSW Chapter ISAA

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### Dates for Your Diary

26 Feb: Biography Reading  
Group

27 Feb: Work-in-Progress  
Meeting

25 Mar: Public Affairs Reading  
Group

Apr: Biography Reading Group

7 May: Annual General Meeting

27 May: Public Affairs Reading  
Group

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### WORK IN PROGRESS MEETING

Friday 27 February 2026

Time: 10.50 am

Meet in the Foyer of the Mitchell Library to be taken to our room

(Session length 11–12.30 pm)

Topic: ‘Cosy Mystery meets Eco-Lit’

Speaker: Dr Susan Steggall

In the recent issue of *ISAA Review* I have an opinion piece entitled ‘The environmental imagination in fiction: a work in progress’.\* If climate change awareness and mitigation are seen as the exclusive preserve of scientists and policymakers, if ‘lay’ citizens believe they lack the specialist knowledge to adapt to new patterns of understanding and action, could it be up to fiction writers to enable them? I am increasingly concerned about damage to the natural world by land clearing and global warming and aim to highlight this in my current and future fiction.

In this Work-in-Progress session I will discuss ways of bringing climate change into fiction, without plunging into either dystopian or utopian scenarios. I will also look at definitions of what constitutes ‘cosy mystery’ and ‘eco-lit’. My manuscript-in-progress follows on from one I am currently submitting to publishers – similar setting and characters, different issues at stake. So I need to address the problem of how to describe what occurred in the previous novel without telling the whole story again – and also be mindful of significant points raised in my November 2025 seminar talk on ‘negotiating reality’ in Hilary Mantel’s fiction.

\* Inspired by Deborah Jordan, *Climate Change Narratives in Australian Fiction*, LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing Saarbrücken, 2014.

*This will be the first Work-in-Progress meeting for 2026. In W-I-P sessions member come along and discuss a work that one of us is in the process or researching/writing to see whether we can make any helpful suggestions about further development of the project. The Library is obliging us with a room but after this meeting we will have to find another venue. Our practice is to make a \$5 donation towards ISAA NSW at these meetings.*



## RECENT EVENTS

22 November 2025

### THE POWER OF FICTION WORKSHOP

ISAA NSW introduced a Workshop into its programme in 2024 on the topic of *Modern Slavery*. In 2025 we turned to a literary topic – *The Power of Fiction*. Below are summaries of the papers delivered and photos of some of the participants at the event which was held in November. The day was a stimulating one and we are in the early stages of planning another workshop for 2026.



LtoR: Helen Topor, Stephanie Russo, Penny Nash, Julie Bozga, Alice Paul, Helen Coolican



LtoR: Helen Coolican, Beverley Firth, Ursula Potter, Lesley Potter, Sue Steggall, Rodney Nilsen, Judith Bonzol



Keynote Speaker: Stephanie Russo

### **Stephanie Russo**

The Keynote Speaker, Stephanie Russo, is an Associate Professor of Literature at Macquarie University, specialises in historical fiction and biofiction and is the author of *The Afterlife of Anne Boleyn* (2020) and *The Anachronistic Turn* (2024). She is currently working on a project on the counterfactual historical novel, to be published by Brill in 2027. Stephanie is particularly interested in representations of time in the novel, and on women's historical fictions. She is the Editor of the *Journal of Historical Fictions* and a series editor of the Brill list *Global Historical Fictions*.

#### **“Wild Thoughts”: Emily Brontë in Contemporary Biofiction’**

There is perhaps no other novelist who has beguiled and confused readers as much as Emily Brontë. The most enigmatic of the Brontë sisters, readers, critics and biographers have struggled to account for the woman who wrote *Wuthering Heights* since its publication in 1847. Emily's apparently intense need for privacy has also proven irresistible to writers of biofiction: she is something of the ideal subject because while many facts about her biography are known, there is plenty of space to speculate about her interior life and how that might have informed her art. Twenty-first century biofictions create a vision of Emily Brontë amenable to the interests of the moment and inflected by contemporary understandings of authorship. As I demonstrated, these novels build both upon existing parameters of the Brontë myth while subtly shifting that mythology into the twenty-first century. These novels are significant not only in what they reveal about Emily Brontë's afterlife, but in the way they simultaneously function as distinct readings of *Wuthering Heights*, given their insistent preoccupation in attempting to find an “answer” for how and why she came to write the novel.

### **Christine de Matos**

In 2015, I published a paper, ‘Fictorians: Historians who “lie” about the past, and like it’ in a special issue of *TEXT*, which I co-edited with Camilla Nelson, on history and fiction. The paper was based on questionnaires with historians who also chose to write historical fiction, exploring their reasons for doing so and reflecting on the ‘fictional turn’ and its meaning for the future of history. For these historians, I coined the term ‘fictorians’. Ten years later, the workshop paper revisited this piece in light of recent developments in history and fiction and the writers who innovatively blend together non-fiction and fiction. Two of the works integrated non-fiction history or biography with fiction in novel ways. These were Anna Funder's *Wifedom* (2023), which includes clearly delineated fictionalised excerpts, and Keira Lindsey's *Wild Love* (2023), a first-person fictionalised narrative based on primary sources (that are shared with the reader) and described as ‘speculative biography’. The second two were novels based on fictionalised family histories related to my primary historical research area of the Allied Occupation of Japan: Alli Parker's *At the Foot of the Cherry Tree* (2023) and Chloe Adams' *The Occupation* (2025), both inspired by their grandmothers' experiences. These books all utilise fiction, albeit in different ways, to reclaim, reveal and revitalise stories about historical women, well known or not, who otherwise remain invisible in the archives and in most non-fiction histories. These recent texts also reveal that since the publication of ‘Fictorians’, the relationship between history and fiction has become more complex and more exciting, and with even more possibilities available to writers and historians. Fictionalised portraits or excerpts can help fill in gaps and add emotional power to the narrative, but it also means that the lines between non-fiction history and fiction are more blurred (and perhaps more confusing) than ever.

#### **“Negotiating with reality”. Hilary Mantel on writing historical fiction’**

Susan Steggall

Hilary Mary Thompson (born 1952) was the eldest of three children. When her father left the family she adopted the name of her de facto stepfather, Mantel. She studied law at the London School of Economics before transferring to the University of Sheffield, graduating in 1973. She married geologist Gerald

McEwen the same year and from 1977 they lived abroad. In her twenties Mantel suffered from an undiagnosed illness, later identified as endometriosis, that profoundly affected her life. She died in 2022.

*A Memoir of My Former Self. A Life in Writing* (2023), which brings together Mantel's journalism, criticism, and Reith Lectures (2017), showcases not only the breadth of her intellect but also her imaginative and dryly humorous prose. I drew three themes from this collection to illuminate Mantel's ideas on the craft of writing historical fiction: sources of inspiration, technique, and the author's responsibility. She believed that novelists must look inward and outward, move between private, domestic, spaces to the broader arenas of civic life, to create a space for fiction and bring distant historical realms into reader's lives.



Mantel filled ninety-seven notebooks with material drawn from observations of the world around her, so her writing emerges from both everyday life and the 'subterranean passages' of the imagination. She followed 'ghostly' Tudor figures through rain-soaked streets, 'they brushing the raindrops from their velvet caps and I making my way back to the keyboard'.

In her first historical fiction – *A Place of Greater Safety* – she introduced techniques used later in *Wolf Hall*: a large cast of characters, attention to sensory detail, and exploration of gaps in the archive. Her reassessment of Thomas Cromwell stemmed from a desire to learn the private life of a man of talent and ambition but whom history viewed as a villain. Mantel knew what Cromwell did, but not what he thought or felt and reached a compromise. She would make up his inner torments, but not, for instance, the colour of his drawing room wallpaper.

She paid close attention to the textures of clothing and furnishings and to the sounds of everyday life in both home and street to discover 'things about yesterday that yesterday did not know itself'. She learned 'to talk Tudor' but did not use language so obscure it was unrecognisable to today's readers.

Novelists must neither to condescend to people of the past nor distort them into contemporary versions of themselves. Writers should also resist the temptation to empower, retrospectively, historical women. The novelist's task is to guide the reader's gaze, invite collaboration in the act of re-creating the past – an alliance that allows both writer and reader to 'negotiate with reality'.

### **'Addressing misogynistic stereotyping and misappropriation'**

Helen Topor

While doing research for *Discovering Vermeer*, I encountered three women in John Michael Montias's seminal *Vermeer and His Milieu*. His misogynistic attitudes to these key women in Johannes Vermeer's life – his wife Catharina Bolnes, his mother-in-law Maria Thins, and his patron Maria de Knuijt – prompted me to write *The Delft Muse*.

In claiming that Catharina made 'few independent decisions',<sup>1</sup> Montias ignores that she defied convention by marrying Vermeer against her mother's will. Furthermore, Montias blames 'the disastrous effects of Catharina's unbridled fertility'<sup>2</sup> for her husband's limited output. Placing the burden of reproductive responsibility on Catharina perpetuates the patriarchal notion that male creativity flourishes without familial 'encumbrances'. Montias was a little kinder, however, to Maria Thins, describing her as 'a domineering old lady, but ... solicitous of her family's welfare'.<sup>3</sup>

Montias, art historians and scholars have uncritically accepted and perpetuated the myth that collector Pieter van Ruijven was Vermeer's patron, on no evidence.<sup>4</sup> When Montias finds a document linking van Ruijven's wife, Maria de Knuijt, to the painter – a bequest of 500 guilders for Vermeer's sole benefit – he rightly declares it 'a rare, perhaps unique, instance of a seventeenth-century Dutch patron's

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<sup>1</sup> John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1989, p237.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p245.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p244.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p172.

testamentary bequest to an artist'. In considering it a 'token of affection',<sup>5</sup> he ignores the bequest's implicit condition – to foster Vermeer's art practice – confirming de Knuijt as Vermeer's true patron. In 2023, the Rijksmuseum officially accorded her that honour.

## The Power of Fiction: Anne Brontë

Michelle Cavanagh

At its core, fiction is literature not grounded in real life events but created by the writer's imagination. But where does any writer's imagination come from, if not from events that have been experienced by the writer in question?

'Shielded by my own obscurity, and by the lapse of years, and a few fictitious names. I do not fear the venture; and will candidly lay before the public what I should not disclose to the most intimate friend.' (*Agnes Grey*).

Anne Brontë, the youngest Brontë sister and seemingly the most mysterious of them all remains a best-selling author nearly two centuries after her death.

While she often lived in the shadows of her more celebrated sisters her two revolutionary novels, *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, published under her pseudonym Acton Bell, plus her poetry, pushed the boundaries of what was acceptable at the time.

Anne Brontë's birth on the 17 January 1820 made the family complete. While not wealthy, Maria and Patrick Brontë, and their children, Maria, Elizabeth, Charlotte, Branwell, Emily and Anne had an abundance of love and a belief in a bright future stretching ahead of them. Just three months after Anne's birth in Thornton the family made a trip with two wagons across the moors to Hawthorn, along with sisters Nancy and Sarah Garrs, thirteen and twelve years old, who had been employed to look after the family since 1816. But sadly, Maria Brontë died when her last-born child, Anne, was only one and a half years old. A deeply thoughtful person, having never met her mother, Anne often wondered what life would have been for her had her mother not died so soon after her birth.

Elizabeth Branwell, Maria Brontë's sister travelled from her home in Cornwall to nurse her dying sister, staying on to look after the family for the rest of her life known to the children as Aunt Branwell. Their father, an enlightened man for his time, indulged his children in both playing and learning; encouraging him to read any of his books, magazines and various newspapers, so they were well versed with what was going on in the world around them

Anne Brontë's first published novel *Agnes Grey* is founded on her own experience, exploring the abuse, social oppression, isolation, harsh realities and the precarious position faced by those who worked as a governess. In her novel, despite the harshness of her employers and the lack of respect from their children, Agnes finds her own strength, which mirrors Anne's own experience as she was the only sister who persevered and made a success of her work as a governess.

Having worked as a governess to various families of the English gentry, Anne's second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, has been seen as the most shocking of the Brontë novels. Published one year before her death it was by far a more ambitious novel and was a great success, rapidly outselling Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. However, the critical reception was mixed – there was praise for the novel's 'power' and 'effect' plus sharp criticism for being 'coarse'. Anne Brontë's preface to the 1848 edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* challenged the prevailing morals of the era, defending the novel's controversial portrayal of vice, arguing that it was more honest and morally instructive to depict bad things in their true, often unpleasant, forms rather than conceal them.

However, after Anne's death on 28 May 1849 Charlotte prevented the novel's republication until 1854 and it appears, she was prepared to consign her sister's novel to oblivion because she considered its



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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p250.

subject as odds with her own perception of what Anne's character was and ought to have been. Condemning her sister to temporary oblivion, Charlotte betrayed her younger sister. Charlotte wrote to her publisher saying that it 'hardly seems to me desirable to preserve ... the choice of subject in that work is a mistake'. Juliet Barker in her biography *The Brontës*, concluded that 'Earlier however, in response to such criticism, Anne [had] responded: "In my own mind, I am satisfied that if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author may be. All novels are or should be written for both men and women to read, and I am at a loss to conceive how a man should permit himself to write anything that would be really disgraceful to a woman, or why a woman should be censured for writing anything that would be proper and unbecoming for a man."'

Until the passing of the *Married Women's Property Act* in 1870 a wife had no independent existence under English law, and therefore no right to own property, to enter into contracts separately from her husband, to sue for divorce, or for the control and custody of her children. Today, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is considered by many critics to be one of the first sustained feminist novels and as such deserves to be read more widely. In this, her last published novel, Anne Brontë explored alcoholism, domestic violence, gender roles, marriage, motherhood, and the idea of the woman artist, themes which directly challenged societal ideas and British Law. No wonder Charlotte tried her best to negate Anne's ideas.

## **The Nature of Reality in the fiction of Tim Winton and Flannery O'Connor**

Lesley Potter

Tim Winton a well-known Western Australian writer and Flannery O'Connor a writer from a southern state of North American share a fascination with the nature of reality which their characters must engage with. The focus for this paper was how reality was presented in Winton's novel *Cloudstreet* and O'Connor's short story *Revelation*.

Both writers write to explore the incursions of the extraordinary into the everyday that reveal something much deeper – the discovery of the depth of meaning embedded in any human life experience. Both writers seek to make sense of such life experiences and to understand the sacred and the secular as one world.

This paper explored the concept of reality in terms of time and place and both writers developed the idea that the crossroad within their narrative is where time and place meet with eternity. They have a similar sense of how a spirit of place, the landscape, can reveal an epiphany of the divine presence often in a moment of time. Time and place are the two axes of reality in *Cloudstreet* and *Revelation*. Both writers construct characters who are poised at this crossroad.

Both writers develop a sense of place by identifying a specific location. The location in *Cloudstreet* is the house at Number 1 Cloud Street, which becomes the crossroad where time and place meet in a celebration of life. The location in *Revelation* is the doctor's waiting room. This waiting room is the place where Ruby Turpin's vision of the world and of herself begins to be transformed.

Winton builds on the sense of place not only to describe a landscape alive with spiritual presence but also to explore the co-existence of a landscape with consciousness, the external as partly constructed by the mind. For Winton the landscape in Australia exists at the edge of consciousness and continually plays on a person's imagination.

O'Connor finds the spirit of place within a landscape. The geography of O'Connor's fiction is territory of the devil and the foray of grace into that territory, which is essentially the terrain of the human heart.

Both writers are acutely aware of the significance of a moment in time. The story of *Cloudstreet* unfolds in the split seconds it takes for Fish Lamb to die. The crucial moment in *Revelation* is the moment grace impinges on Ruby Turpin, and she unwillingly accepts her alienation from herself, her world and her God – the recognition of what she has lost.

Both Winton and O'Connor depict reality as something their characters must confront.

## Jane Austen's 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

Judith Bonzol

Jane Austen's fiction emerged at a time when the novel was only just beginning to take shape as a literary form. She broke new ground through a combination of new narrative techniques, deepening psychological realism, the elevation of everyday life as worthy of art, and the use of the novel as a vehicle for social critique. Her novels have never been out of print, circulate globally in many languages, and attract continuous waves of adaptation and celebration, from nineteenth-century theatricals and early film to Hollywood versions, Bollywood reimaginings, and fan fiction that transposes her plot and themes across cultures and genres. The 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her birth becomes a touchpoint for this ongoing 'Austenmania', showing how deeply her characters and stories have entered the modern imagination.

At the same time, her fiction is far from apolitical comfort reading. Austen's life intersected with the French Revolution and the Napoleonic and American wars, and those conflicts pervade works such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Persuasion* through militia encampments, naval careers, wartime separations, and postwar economic distress. Her novels capture the moral repercussions of militia regiments overrunning southern towns, Portsmouth's military landscape, and the fragile ending of *Persuasion* on the eve of Waterloo all illustrating an era saturated with military threat and financial uncertainty.

Economic and social critique runs through all the novels. Austen's sharp attention to inheritance, entail, debt, and economic uncertainty is linked to her own family's financial instability and constrained options for women, making the marriage plot a vehicle for exposing class mobility, patriarchal authority, and female vulnerability. *Mansfield Park* is set against the backdrop of plantation wealth and the slave trade, with Fanny's uneasy question about slavery, Lord Mansfield's legal legacy, and Austen's admiration for abolitionists suggesting a complex, if implicit, engagement with empire and race, later echoed by the presence of a 'mixed-race' character in *Sandition*.

Austen's artistry and achievement lie in transforming "three or four families in a country village" into a crucible for psychological realism and moral inquiry. She invented realistic, natural dialogue, her plots are believable and character-driven without preaching and without resorting to absurd coincidences. She wrote brilliant theatrical dialogue and was the first novelist to master the sustained use of free indirect style that fuses narrative voice with characters' consciousness. This technique, especially evident in *Emma*, allows nuanced irony and interiority which influenced later writers such as Virginia Wolfe, F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce, and others. Above all, Austen showed how domestic comedy can bear the weight of social critique, gendered agency, and enduring questions about human motives and moral growth.

### 'The Man Within' in the Novels of Graham Greene\*

Penelope Nash

After about 80 pages into the novel, *Brighton Rock*, the character Pinkie considers himself ill-used and insulted, and he thinks to himself:

*He was going to show the world. They thought because he was only seventeen ... he jerked his narrow shoulders back at the memory that he'd killed his man, and these bogies who thought they were clever weren't clever enough to discover that. He trailed the clouds of his own glory after him: hell lay about him in his infancy. He was ready for more deaths.*

These lines sum up the personality of Pinkie, one of the three main characters in the novel.

*Brighton Rock* began as a detective story. It is set in a sleazy somewhat transformed Brighton in the 1930s, where a gang war is raging. There are three main characters – Pinkie, introduced above, and two women, Rose and Ida. The three of them are *more* than just characters. They are representatives of concepts, that is, evil, good and the fates.

Greene is a very literary writer. *Brighton Rock* includes several subtle references to *Hamlet*. An allusion to the poet William Wordsworth appears too. Wordsworth wrote in his ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood’ (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45536/ode-intimations-of-immortality-from-recollections-of-early-childhood>):

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;*

...

*But **trailing** clouds of glory do we come*

...

*Heaven lies about us in our infancy!*

Greene has intentionally twisted Wordsworth’s lines to show how evil Pinkie is. ‘He **trailed** the clouds of his **own glory** after him: **hell** lay about him in his infancy.’

There is a tension or an unease running through the novels. Will someone get found out or killed? What are the moral and political dimensions that the characters are dealing with?

Greene originally divided his fiction into two genres, which he described as ‘entertainments’ (that is, thrillers) and ‘novels’ (that is, literary works). In this short article I can only address two of Greene’s many splendid novels. He originally called *Our Man in Havana* an entertainment, which it certainly is. But later changed it to a novel. It is extremely funny but also very serious as it deals with issues in corrupt and superstitious Havana in Cuba, during the period of the Cold War and the regime of Batista, before the rule of Fidel Castro.

The main character, James Wormold, sells vacuum cleaners. He loves his sixteen-year-old daughter, who goes to a Catholic school, is taught by the nuns and is *very* pious – much to her father’s chagrin. He worries about how he can get money to send her to finishing school in Switzerland, and therein lies the tale. The book is a very amusing sendup of MI6 and spying, and also much more.

Greene’s novels are thrillers rather than murder procedurals or standard detective stories. All Greene’s novels query what is a real moral compass versus a socially approved morality. Indeed [William Golding](#) aptly called Greene ‘the ultimate chronicler of twentieth-century man's consciousness and anxiety’.

\* ‘*The Man Within* in the Novels of Graham Greene’, an article developed from the paper, ‘Getting to Know the Writer – Graham Greene’.



## BOOK NOTES

### Public Affairs Reading Group Discussion

26 November 2025

*The Forever War: America’s Unending Conflict with Itself (417 pp)*

Nick Bryant

Viking, 2024; ISBN 978-1-76104-862-3

The author is a journalist with a strong background in American history. The book is well written, ambitious, and is impressive for its very detailed knowledge of American history. There are notes and an index, although a bibliography and a timeline would have been helpful, and there are numerous quotations that are not sourced. Originally published in 2024, this edition is revised and takes account of the second Trump period. The overarching argument is that America has a history in which many problematic issues have arisen, but they have never been fully resolved and keep reappearing -- sometimes in changed forms, but continually disrupting the body politic, often with violence. Hence his reference to America’s ‘continuing war with itself’ and ‘unending conflict’. The chapters are not chronologically arranged, but each has a theme that is treated historically.

He considers American history since the occupation by Europeans in the early seventeenth century (Jamestown 1607, the Mayflower 1620). Specific issues include: the inconsistencies between the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the Constitution of the United States formulated in 1787, constitutional issues, the American conception of democracy, presidential powers, slavery, race, segregation, voting rights, the degree of independence of the judiciary, guns and violence, the place of religion in public life, the demagogic tendency in public discourse, the acceptance of rebellion, and a suspicion of government. He considers that America has ‘a tradition of revisiting the past’ but in a way that brings out continuing grievance.

Of special relevance for our times is the latitude in the Presidential powers given by the Constitution. Bryant affirms his agreement with a statement of S. Levitzky and D. Ziblatt: ‘The constitution is virtually silent on the president’s authority to act unilaterally, via decrees or executive orders, and it does not define the limits of executive power during crises’. A sub-theme of his book -- how a tendency in America to sentimentalise, aggrandise and omit is used to validate and take pride in national history, rather than facing historical realities, and of developing a more complex way of responding to them in the public sphere. Thus, in Chapter 9 he treats the term ‘American exceptionalism’ with considerable irony.

Bryant says various good things about America but, given the overall tone of his book, one might ask: is Bryant’s book “Anti-American”? Some might think so, but his account is realistic, and the complexities and contradictions in America and its history that he considers point to the destabilised society that America is today. This book is strongly recommended. **Rodney Nilsen**



## FILM NOTE

### *Blue Moon*

The 2025 film *Blue Moon* is set in Sardi’s bar on 31 March 1943, on the opening night of the smash Broadway hit *Oklahoma!* – created by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. Between 1919 and 1943, Lorenz Hart (Ethan Hawke, who plays the part ‘with campy brilliance, an unspeakable comover and fake smallness’) and Richard Rodgers (Andrew Scott) had collaborated on 28 stage musicals and over 500 songs. The film centres on Hart’s inner turmoil, alcoholism and jealousy over the course of the evening as he watches Rodgers succeed with a new partner, Oscar Hammerstein II. As the evening progresses, we witness Hart’s realisation that his career and influence in the theatrical world are in decline.

My interest in the film was piqued by the primary female character, Elizabeth Weiland (Margaret Qualley), who is portrayed as Hart’s protégé or confidante. Robert Kaplow’s script – and the character of Elizabeth – are said to have been ‘inspired’ by carbon copies of letters written to Hart and signed by ‘Elizabeth Weiland’. The question that immediately comes to mind is whether the letters exist. Yes, they do: Kaplow bought the copies from a bookseller in Nyack.

Nothing is known about the real-life Elizabeth and, although Kaplow may possess the letters, the character and extent of the relationship with Hart as portrayed in the film are works of fiction. At the same time, the film leaves us in no doubt about Lorenz Hart’s sexuality. While his idealised love for ‘Elizabeth’ may have added mystery, emotional depth, and a poignant contrast to his witty public persona, the relationship strikes a false note. The surviving letters from Elizabeth therefore function less as evidence of a romance than a tantalising fragment of history reshaped for dramatic effect.

**Christine Yeats**



## READING GROUP MEETINGS FOR 2026

Our first meeting will be on 26 February 2-3.30 pm discussing *The Rebel's Clinic: The Revolutionary Lives of Frantz Fanon* by Adam Shatz, 2024, 464 pp.

This meeting will be by zoom and we plan on zoom meetings for the remainder of the year, in April, June, August and October. Our books in turn for those months:

*The Invisible Woman: the story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens* by Claire Tomalin, 1990 Penguin, 384pp

*Elizabeth Harrower: The Woman in the Watch Tower* by Susan Wyndham, 2025, New South, 336pp

*Doc Evatt: The Brilliant Boy - Doc Evatt and the Great Australian Dissent*, by Gideon Haigh, 2022, 384pp

*This House of Grief* by Helen Garner, 2014, 288pp

If you are interested in joining us please contact the convenor Alice Paul on [acpnsw6@gmail.com](mailto:acpnsw6@gmail.com)



## PUBLIC AFFAIRS READING GROUP

Please see below for the programme for 2026 with dates, books etc below.

3 pm Zoom Wed 25 March - Rodney will introduce Tim Berners-Lee's *This is for Everyone: The Unfinished Story of the World Wide Web* (2025)

3 pm Zoom Wed 27 May - Susan will introduce Henry Reynold's *Looking from the North: Australian History from Top Down* (2025)

3 pm Zoom Wed 29 July - Jan will introduce Nancy Pelsosi's *The Art of Power: My Story as America's First Woman Speaker of the House* (2024)

3 pm Zoom Wed 30 September – Bob will introduce Sean Kelly's 'The Good Fight – What does Labor Stand For', *Quarterly Essay*, Issue 100, (Nov. 2025)

3 pm Zoom Wed 25 Nov Christine will introduce Rory Stewart's *Politics on the Edge: A Memoir from within* (UK) (2024)



### Verbalising Can Clarify

Do you wonder what other people might think of your ideas?

Tired of keeping them to yourself?

Want some genuine, helpful, and considered discussion of *your* work-in-progress?

If an ISAA Work-in-Progress meeting interests you, please contact:

[cjennett@ozemail.com.au](mailto:cjennett@ozemail.com.au)

**Book Notes   Exhibition Notes   Film Notes**

**Research Snippets**

If you have read a book, seen an exhibition or a film of substance lately or